United Nations A/52/1018

General Assembly

Distr.: General
19 August 1998

Original: English

Fifty-second session
Agenda items 20, 107 and 112

Strengthening of the coordination of humanitarian and disaster relief assistance of the United Nations, including special economic assistance

Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, questions relating to refugees, returnees and displaced persons and humanitarian questions

Human rights questions

Letter dated 18 August 1998 from the Permanent Representative of Ethiopia to the United Nations addressed to the President of the General Assembly

I have the honour to transmit herewith a statement by the delegation of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia delivered at the fiftieth session of the Subcommission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities, currently taking place at Geneva (annex I). I am also transmitting two additional statements by the delegation of Ethiopia in the exercise of its right of reply to the baseless allegations against Ethiopia made by the delegation of Eritrea at the said meeting of the Subcommission (annexes II and III).

I should be grateful if you would kindly circulate the text of the present letter and its annexes as a document of the fifty-second session of the General Assembly, under agenda items 20, 107 and 112.

(*Signed*) Duri **Mohammed**
Ambassador
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Annex I

Statement on the atrocities being committed by the Eritrean Government against Ethiopian nationals in Eritrea and in occupied Ethiopian territory, delivered on 6 August 1998 by the delegation of Ethiopia to the Commission on Human Rights Subcommission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities

The distinguished members of the Subcommission and observer delegations are by now well aware of the crisis that has developed between Ethiopia and Eritrea, since the Eritrean regime continues as the aggressor and is still occupying Ethiopian territory. Apart from this, the humanitarian consequences of the aggression are staggering. Hundreds of Ethiopians have lost their lives, hundreds of thousands have been displaced and other hundreds of Ethiopians are subjected to inhuman treatment in Eritrea.

The delegation of Ethiopia fully recognizes that the mandate of the Subcommission does not allow it to discuss or make a determination as to the nature of the aggression of Eritrea against Ethiopia. However, when such blatant violation of the basic principles of the Charter of the United Nations is accompanied by persistent and grave violations of human rights and humanitarian norms, the Subcommission needs to be informed of the facts and should also take urgent actions in defence of the thousands of Ethiopians at the mercy of the Eritrean regime.

The time allocated to this statement would not allow us to enumerate all atrocities being committed by the Eritrean Government against Ethiopian nationals in Eritrea. Hence we would limit ourselves only to the following.

1. From the beginning of the aggression, the sinister intention of the Eritrean regime has been to create a climate of fear and terror among the Ethiopian population. In the occupied territory of Badme and its environs, from 12 May to 12 June 1998, the Eritrean invading forces killed 20 and injured 20 innocent civilians and destroyed 23 basic social facilities, comprising 12 elementary schools, 9 health posts and 2 clinics, depriving the entire population of Badme the right to health and education. They also looted churches of their highly valued icons and ceremonial crosses and robbed grain depots, domestic animals, construction materials and other properties. As a result of these brutal actions, thousands were displaced and left homeless and are now sheltered in relief centres. During this period, for no apparent reason except to cause further destruction, the Eritrean regime indiscriminately shelled and completely destroyed the Ethiopian town of Zalambessa, where 15,000 inhabitants were forced to flee to Adigrat, where they were again bombed a week later.

2. The Eritrean Government has been committing grave breaches of general international humanitarian law and human rights by deliberately attacking civilians with napalm. Thus, on 5 June, Eritrean warplanes, targeting civilians, killed 51 persons and wounded 136 others, aged between 5 and 70. The main victims of this heinous act were children in an elementary school at Mekelle and families who happened to be in the vicinity looking for their children. There is no question that the air strike at the elementary school was a premeditated attack, as the Eritrean warplanes returned to strike again within two hours. This savage attack was aired by the international news media, including CNN, and interested participants here can see for themselves the extent of the suffering caused to children through a video available with our delegation.

3. On 11 June, Eritrean warplanes unleashed another indiscriminate air attack on civilian establishments on the town of Adigrat, killing 4 civilians and wounding 30 others, and destroying two relief supply warehouses set up for displaced people. The victims of this second indiscriminate attack were the same people previously displaced by the aggressors from the border town of Zalambessa.

4. The brutal actions by the Eritrean regime are not limited to Ethiopian civilians in Ethiopia. The Eritrean Government has also unleashed a campaign of terror against Ethiopians in Eritrea. To give but one example, on 6 June, the Eritrean Government paraded an Ethiopian prisoner of war in the streets of Asmara, while encouraging the crowd to throw stones at him.

5. Since 9 June, the Eritrean regime has brutally expelled well over 4,000 Ethiopian civilians after confiscating their property, including personal belongings, and after inflicting severe injuries on them. Many of them were deported through hostile territory across the common border in an inhuman manner, while more than 3,000 Ethiopians were deported from Assab and 180 from other parts of Eritrea. The Government tries to hoodwink the international community by forcing Ethiopians to sign a document alleging that they are leaving Eritrea of their own free will and without any harm to them. This is an insult to all the victims and clearly shows the vicious nature of the act of the Eritrean regime. Moreover, those returning are testifying daily that Eritrean soldiers are committing rape against Ethiopian women. This barbarity was confirmed when, on 29 July, a non-governmental organization called Ethio-Sweden Children and Youth Correctional and Rehabilitation Project announced that it was prepared to diagnose and counsel Ethiopian women raped by Eritrean soldiers. It has also been reported by returnees that four Ethiopians were burnt alive while they were asleep.

6. The Eritrean Government has also been holding Ethiopians as hostages. On 8 June, nine buses transporting Ethiopians returning to their home country were turned back from Mendeferra by the Eritrean police. From that day onwards, no Ethiopian citizen has left Asmara via the Mendeferra road. However, Ethiopians have repeatedly applied for exit visas and are constantly being denied them by the Eritrean Government. Those who try to leave through the common border are being beaten and their personal belongings confiscated. This grave situation has worsened since 14 July, when 30,000 Ethiopians residing in the port city of Assab were denied their right to work or to return to their country. As a result, two Ethiopian women who were unable to feed their families committed suicide. Some are exposed to rigorous forms of supervision whereby they are obliged to report to the Eritrean People's Liberation Front office every day. Ethiopians who are being summarily dismissed from their employment include housemaids, private employees and day labourers. About 2,000 Ethiopians living in Asmara have received the same inhuman treatment and are now staying on the streets with no food or shelter. Moreover, they are being subjected to extreme forms of harassment, intimidation and beatings.

7. In its continuing campaign of terror, the Eritrean Government has also summarily killed innocent and unarmed Ethiopian nationals. On 28 June, 114 Ethiopians working as gardeners were arrested by the military forces at Alia and beaten persistently and violently. As a result of this blatant abuse, one Ethiopian passed away immediately and three others sustained grave injuries. Similarly, on 8 July, 380 Ethiopians left on their way to Ethiopia. Many of them were made to pay Eritrean Nakfa 150 (equivalent to US$ 25.00) to obtain a permit to leave the country. But when they reached the city of Adiquala, the border guards not only prevented them from proceeding, but also opened fire, killing a few of them. To date, the whereabouts of 86 of the survivors of this cold-blooded murder are unknown. The rest have been forced to go back to Asmara and 189 of them are currently being sheltered

in the compound of the Ethiopian Embassy there. Furthermore, on 15 July, about 60 Ethiopian nationals were asphyxiated to death in the Eritrean Red Sea port of Assab after being locked in unventilated cargo containers. This cruel act of detaining people in unventilated cargo containers, in 40 degrees centigrade, is still continuing.

8. It has also been established that over 600 Ethiopian civilians are being held in different detention centres in Eritrea. Most of the detainees are day labourers who have no relatives in Eritrea. No international agency nor journalist has been allowed to visit them. Despite its declarations, the Eritrean Government still refuses a visit by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). An eyewitness account from Eritrea has established that the detainees are being subjected to torture and the most cruel and inhuman treatment.

9. The Eritrean Government has been trying to impose Eritrean citizenship on Ethiopians living in the areas it occupied by force, and it banishes those who refuse to accept the imposition, after robbing them of their personal possessions.

Atrocities being committed by the Eritrean regime defy any logic or reason. The cruelty and barbarity of their actions are inexplicable. It is deplorable that they try to justify their inhuman actions by their dictum, in the words of their Head of State, that "war has no rules" and that "indiscriminate killings of civilians are inevitable and justifiable in war".

The most horrifying and pressing aspect of this outrageous behaviour is that all these monstrous acts are being committed without any relevant international presence in Eritrea. ICRC, the relevant United Nations agencies and non-governmental organizations have no access to Ethiopians being tortured in Eritrean prisons. The Eritrean Government claims that it has not ratified the Geneva Conventions and is not obliged to invite anybody to visit civilian internees and prisoners of war. This behaviour must be condemned and stopped with the utmost urgency.

In the light of the foregoing, the Eritrean Government has no moral standing to appear before this august body, let alone to accuse Ethiopia of human rights violations. It is the Eritrean regime alone that is responsible for committing gross and flagrant violations of basic human rights and freedoms and principles of international humanitarian law. Yet it has the temerity to accuse Ethiopia of human rights violations. This behaviour is indeed a glaring demonstration of the extent of hypocrisy of the Eritrean regime. But, much as it may try to do so by playing the victim, the Eritrean regime has not succeeded in deceiving any objective observer of its heinous acts.

With regard to the underlying issue between the two countries, the Eritrean Government has not only rejected the proposals and appeals for the peaceful resolution of the dispute between the two countries, but is also escalating tensions by deliberately attacking Ethiopian civilians in Eritrea and in the occupied Ethiopian territory. In the face of such provocation, the international community has lauded the measured and restrained approach followed by the Ethiopian Government throughout the crisis.

In closing, the Ethiopian delegation reiterates that the Ethiopian Government remains fully committed to respect the human rights of all Eritreans peacefully living in the country. The full access given to all relevant international organizations is clear testimony of our transparency in this regard.

Annex II

Statement made by the delegation of Ethiopia in the exercise of right of reply, under item 2, at the fiftieth session of the Subcommission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities

I am taking the floor in the exercise of my right of reply to the statement of the observer for Eritrea.

At the outset, I would like to give more facts in addition to the gruesome summary of facts that I have provided under this item. Since it would require hours and days to tell the stories about the atrocities that the Eritrean regime has been committing against Ethiopian civilians, I am again obliged to limit myself to some highlights.

As soon as the Eritrean invading forces entered the Ethiopian territory of Badme, they summarily executed in public 3 individuals and tortured 30 others, as a punishment for their presumed resistance of the aggression. In these occupied areas, the Eritrean regime is extensively and indiscriminately deploying anti-personnel landmines to terrorize Ethiopian civilians and deny them access to farmlands, and to cause famine and to evict Ethiopians of their land and, eventually, the occupied territories. As a result of this vicious act, hundreds of innocent civilians and cattle have been killed and many other civilians maimed. This flagrant violation of international humanitarian law has also increased the number of displaced people by the hundreds of thousands.

The Eritrean regime has not limited itself to these criminal acts. It has been conspiring to complement them with various terrorist and espionage networking activities inside Ethiopia. To this end, it has tried to organize an underground organization called "People's Front for Democracy and Justice". The sinister aim of this clandestine activity is the destabilization of Ethiopia, using Eritrean nationals residing in Ethiopia.

The illegal structure of this organization was uncovered at the earliest stage. It was intended to be involved in the following illegal activities:

(a) Fund-raising to support the Eritrean war of aggression against Ethiopia;

(b) Espionage, gathering and dispatching information to the Eritrean Government;

(c) Dissemination of war propaganda to strengthen the Eritrean war of aggression;

(d) Promoting and executing terrorist and subversive missions assigned by the Eritrean Government to be carried out in Ethiopia.

It should be made clear that the protest by Eritrea in connection with the so-called expulsion of Eritreans from Ethiopia is not because of concern about Eritrean nationals, but because the stated threat of the Eritrean Head of State "to strike at the heart of Ethiopia" that is, to carry out terrorist activities, has been foiled by the dismantling of their extensive network within Ethiopia.

Faced with such an immediate and grave threat to the safety of Ethiopian citizens and the security of the country, the Government of Ethiopia asked those limited number of Eritreans involved in the illegal activities to leave the country.

These measures were taken in full transparency and in accordance with pertinent international norms and principles.

Moreover, the Ethiopian Government invited the Red Cross representative to be present when the individuals were transported. It has also allowed the families of those who were asked to leave the country to remain in Ethiopia if they wish to do so, and has enabled

those leaving the country to maintain ownership of all their assets in Ethiopia by appointing caretakers to look after their property in their absence.

Yet, in a manifest demonstration of the extent of the hypocrisy of the Government of Eritrea, the observer for that country contemptuously cites international human rights covenants and articles from the Geneva Conventions, none of which the Eritrean Government dared to ratify. Moreover, Eritrea disseminates stories, without any foundation, that the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) has full access to Ethiopian nationals brutally detained in that country. I have attached a press release from ICRC which indicates that the organization is still working to get access to Eritrea, while it has visited Eritrean internees in Ethiopia. No humanitarian agency, including the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, is able to function in Eritrea. This shows the extent to which the Eritrean Government will go in fabricating facts to justify its heinous acts.

The Eritrean authorities have now come up with a new version of lies for their napalm attack on an elementary school in Mekelle. Their story is that their target was an air force base. This is a bizarre story, in that there is no air force based in Mekelle. Suffice it to say that it is only a figment of their imagination designed to cover up their crimes against civilians.

Appendix

Press statement issued by the International Committee of the Red Cross in issue No. 27 of "ICRC News" dated 9 July 1998

Ethiopia/Eritrea
ICRC delegates visit prisoners of war and provide medical assistance for conflict victims

The ICRC carried out two visits to the 163 prisoners of war being held in Fiche camp, the first on 27 June and the second on 2 July. All of these prisoners have now been registered.

On 26 June a visit was also made to the civilian internees being held in Fiche in order to register those who had arrived since the ICRC first went to the camp on 20 June. At the end of the second visit a total of 664 civilian internees had been registered.

All the visits were conducted in accordance with the ICRC's standard working procedures and will be repeated on a regular basis.

The civilian internees and prisoners of war who had not yet been in contact with their families wrote Red Cross messages which will be distributed via the Ethiopian Red Cross Society, the Red Cross Society of Eritrea and other National Societies.

In close conjunction with the Tigray branch of the Ethiopian Red Cross and the regional health authorities, the ICRC furnished additional medical supplies to be distributed to hospitals and other medical facilities in the northern Tigray region of the country.

In Eritrea, the National Society is continuing to provide medical facilities with ambulances and volunteers near potential conflict areas along the Ethiopian border. Such action has proved helpful in the past, particularly when fighting broke out near the town of Zalambessa and in the south-eastern border area. Local Red Cross branches are being regularly resupplied with first-aid equipment and other essential non-food items. At the same time, in cooperation with local authorities, the Eritrean Red Cross is continuing to assess the situation of displaced persons and other civilians affected by the conflict.

As part of their tracing activities, the ICRC and the Eritrean Red Cross have so far collected 16 Red Cross messages from the families of young men who were studying in Ethiopia under a bilateral exchange programme. Meanwhile, the ICRC is keeping up its dialogue with the authorities in Asmara concerning the protection of persons wounded or captured during the recent fighting.

Annex III

Statement made on 7 August 1998 by the delegation of Ethiopia in the exercise of the right of reply under item 2 at the fiftieth session of the Subcommission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities

I am sorry to take the floor again. But this has been imposed upon me by the latest diatribe of the Eritrean delegation. Allow me to recount some additional horrific stories that further show why, in my earlier statement, I asserted that the Eritrean Government should not even appear before this august body, let alone accuse Ethiopia of human rights violations.

The first story is about Mr. Kahsai, who was a hard-working person trying to support a family of seven, with another addition on the way. Mr. Kahsai had an ox, a cow, and one sheep. He was, in fact, a better person by the standards of many families in his neighbourhood. He owned a family house. His son, Solomon Kahsai, was a fifth grade student in Aider School, which was the target of Eritrean warplanes in an indiscriminate attack at Mekelle. Mr. Kahsai, like all parents that day, rushed to the scene of the bombing to look for his child. He was caught in the second air raid, having actually found his son. He was returning home when, unfortunately, he and his son Solomon were brutally killed. Hagos Kahsai, a secondary school student, also had rushed to the scene. When he was running about looking for his brothers and sisters, what he came across were the mutilated bodies of his father and his brother. Hagos snapped instantly and, until this very moment, he is mentally affected. He does not know, nor can he understand, when others talk to him. The tragedy of this family does not end here. Kahsai's wife, who has since given birth, is left alone with five children as the sole breadwinner of the devastated family. Their animals were killed. She is reduced to instant destitution.

The second story is even more tragic. Mrs. Ilfe was a widow raising two children, of 11 and 8 years of age. She was among those who were forcefully and violently evicted from Eritrea. Like everyone that was ousted from that country by the Eritrean Government, everything she owned was confiscated and she took nothing when she was expelled from Eritrea. In Mekelle, she was leading a marginal life selling "sewa", the local beer, in trying to raise her two children. When the Eritrean air raid was being showered indiscriminately, Mrs. Ilfe was at home. She, like all other parents with children in the school, rushed to the scene to look for her son. Unfortunately, she was caught in the second air attack and died on the spot. Her 11-year-old son sustained a leg wound and was taken to a hospital. The 8-year-old was not at school that day. He had been sent to their home village on an errand. The end result is, that day, we had two instant orphans.

The third story is yet another tragedy. Mrs. Alemach G. Medhin is a poor lady. She lives with her only daughter in the vicinity of the school. She supports herself and her daughter, Birhan Atsebeha, who is a ninth grade student at Yohannis IV Secondary School, by working as a street sweeper. That fateful day of the Eritrean air raid, the daughter was standing at the door of her house, when a fragment of the cluster bomb the Eritrean warplanes dropped hit her. She died on the spot. Today, Mrs. Alemach's hope for a better tomorrow when her daughter finishes her education is gone. In her old age, she will lead a lonely life with no visible source of support, and in total anguish and distress.

I can go on recounting the tragedies and atrocities that the Eritrean Government has perpetrated in Mekelle and Adigrat. I can tell of people who have lost arms, legs and limbs, or of a young boy who was hit on the head and is now paralysed from the waist down and

needs life-long support. But there is no need to continue. The three stories I have recounted are adequate in themselves, to show the extent of the cruelty of the Eritrean regime and the hypocrisy of that Government in talking about human rights and humanitarian laws.